



**Volume
One**

PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUPS OF INDIA

Livelihood Patterns and Development Strategies

**EDITED BY
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Concept

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Livelihood Patterns and Development Strategies

VOLUME ONE

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THE ONGE ETHNOGRAPHY THROUGH THE CHANGES:

My Own Experience and Observation

Pronob Kumar Sircar

Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in Bay of Bengal, though forming one administrative unit, consist of two separate groups of Islands with entirely different communities living under very dissimilar conditions.

The Andamans consist of a chain of islands stretching from "Landfall Island" in the north to Little Andaman in the south in an arc stretching over 200 miles of sea. There is then an open stretch of water for 80 miles until Car Nicobar is reached, the Northernmost of the Nicobar group of Islands which continue in the same arc for another 200 miles to Great Nicobar which is only about 100 miles from the Northern tip of Sumatra – less than the distance between Agra and Delhi.

The Islands have a natural coverage of evergreen tropical rain forest up to 86 per cent and have tremendous scope for development of international tourism.

There is a preponderance of evergreen trees in the Andaman forests, but they are generally heavily laden with climbers. The variety and wealth of the flora found in the Andaman Islands is evident from the fact that, C.E. Parkinson deals with as many as 650 plants in his book "*A forest flora of Andaman Island*". Of them 540, he thinks are indigenous to the islands. There is a great importance of many of these described species of plants and animals in the tribal life.

The Onge or Ongee are one of the Andaman tribes of the Andaman Islands, presently located at Dugong Creek of Little Andaman Island. They belong to the Negrito race. They were formerly distributed across

The Inter-Islands Migration

There has always been a lengthy discussions and debate from time to time at different platforms over the issues concerning the origin and migration of the ancient negrito Onge community. The genetic research has still a long way to go for unearthing more clues in context of the offshoots and adaptations to the new environment after the first groups came out of the African region. Their modern history or say recorded history through the British accounts in 1800s reveals collectively that they were the sole inhabitants of the South Andaman including the Little Andaman Island and the Rutland Island.

Portman observed the Onge group to be comprised of the Onges, who inhabited the whole of Little Andaman Island, the people in the interior of Rutland Island, the tribes in the interior of South Andaman and the tribes on the North Sentinel Island. Further he wrote that the sub-division of the Onge tribe on the Little Andaman appeared to be (1) the people on the North coast from *Bumila Creek* to *Kuai-Echekwada* (northern coast), (2) the people on the North-east coast from *Kuai-Echekwada* to *Titaije*, (3) the people of the East-coast, from *Titalje* to *Toinyugeda*, (4) the people in *Daogule Bay*, (5) the people in *Hut Bay* and down to *Toibalowe*, (6) the people on the South coast, (7) the people on the South-west coast, up to *Api Island*, (8) the people from *Api Island* to *Nachuge*, (9) the people from *Jackson Creek* to *Tokyui*, and (10) the *Palalankwe* people. Portman added that the North Sentinel people appeared to a recent offshoot from the Onges.³

According to A.R. Radcliffe Brown in his *The Andaman Islanders* (1922), the natives of the Little Andaman refer to themselves as *Onge* (men). It is probable that the so-called Jarawa of the South Andaman have the same word. In a vocabulary obtained by Colebrooke in 1790 from a Jarawa near Port Blair, the word *mincopie* is given as meaning a native of the Andaman Islands. This would seem to be simply the same phrase as the Little Andaman *M'Onge-bi* – I am *Onge* or I am a 'man'. The word *Jarawa* is apparently derived from the *Aka-bea* language, but is now used by all the friendly natives (i.e. the natives of the Great Andaman Group) to denote those of the Little Andaman Group. In the official publications dealing with the Andamans, however, the term *Jarawa* has come to be applied solely to the hostile natives of the Great Andaman. It is in this sense that the word is used in the present work, the name *Onge* being reserved for the natives of the Little Andaman. It must be remembered,

however, that the so-called *Jarawa* probably call themselves as *Onge*, while the *Onge* of the Little Andaman are called *Jarawa* by the natives of the friendly tribes of the Great Andaman. The name *Mincopies* at one time was common in ethnological literature as a term for the Andaman Islanders. Further Brown mentioned about the 1901 census report in which, 672 *Onges* were estimated in the Little Andaman Island and there were estimated 351 natives living on the Rutland Island, recorded as *Jarawa* of Rutland. Brown's own observation led him to conclude that the *Onges* of Little Andaman Island were estimated to be 600-700 in 1901. He in 1907 spent some weeks on the Rutland Island and at that time there were certainly not more than 50 natives on the island. According to him, the Rutland Island *Jarawa* have been cut off from the other *Jarawa* by the spread of the convict settlement since about 1885. The majority of the *Jarawa* now inhabit the interior and western coast of the South Andaman.

As a Tribal Welfare Officer in the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti, I was posted at the *Onge* settlement in the year 2006. During the last twenty years of my stint among the tribal groups, I have discussed with some of the senior members of the *Jarawa* community namely Tahapaad, Thodova, Chai and Gene and according to them, they and the *Onges* were one tribe in remote past and till decades ago the *Onges* lived distantly in the Rutland Island. The old *Jarawa* members never saw any *Onge* in their lifetime in and around the *Bada Balu* (west coast of South Andaman); but they disclosed that the *Onges* used to visit the southern tip of South Andaman. During my general interaction with Late Sirikishen alias Gora Munna in 2019, an old resident of Bumliton, revealed that the *Onges* in groups often visited his village where an old man had a friendly relationship with them. The *Onges* often visited his courtyard from Rutland and adjacent places and a big *Degchi* (cooking vessel) was always ready there to give them. They would cook the given rice and prepare tea during their short stay in his premises. This was going on during 1940s. Another account of a resident revealed that during January 1944, an *Onge* couple arrived and they had camped at Homfraygunj for few days. These accounts of the local residents and the *Jarawa* members pushed me to conclude that even in 1940s the *Onges* were not only living in the Little Andaman but Rutland Island was also inhabited by them in groups permanently. The *Onges* of Little Andaman frequently visited the Rutland Island with the purpose of hunting-fishing and to meet their *Onge* friends and kins of Rutland. The

Onges themselves said that the Rutland Island for centuries was not only a camping place but their ancestors permanently lived there. Tanaguru, the eldest member of the Onges backed by some senior members Bhalla, Totanagae, Kogagili, Chotaraju and Badaraju had also told me that their forefathers lived in Rutland Island decades ago. One day in a storm called 'Tomaley' few groups in canoes began to float towards the *Tokobuley* (Dugong Creek). After reaching here they were delighted in finding that the region had a plenty of food resources including the Dugong and then they decided to make Dugong Creek their permanent abode. During this time already some groups of Onges inhabited other parts of the Little Andaman. They were inhabiting chiefly the North-central region, North-West region (Jackson Creek) and Southern region (South Bay).

After their resettlement, the inland Onge groups (Eremtaga) and the shore dwellers (Aryoto), began to live together at one place. Both the group members pay visit to the adjacent places including the Bumila Creek, which has a long history of the visits. Boden Kloss and his team visited this place on 17th February, 1901 by steam launches Bess and Bells arrived off Bumila Creek. They took 25 coconut seedlings for planting and a number of fowls for breeding. The seedlings were planted in a suitable spot. Captain Anderson demonstrated the performance from his 303 rifle. Mr. D'oyly and E.H. Man were also present in the team. The Onges often pay visit to this place for hunting-fishing with their traditional canoes (*Dangey*).

Resettlement—New Challenges for the Onge

The Little Andaman Island was initially declared as 'Tribal Reserve' in 1957 which was subsequently constituted into 'Reserve Forest' during 1963. The forests of this island remained practically untouched and undisturbed until the Ministry of Rehabilitation had undertaken one of the biggest projects in Little Andaman to settle 7,000 families. In the Fifth Five Year Plan period special emphasis was given to mobilize rehabilitation project speedily and systematically. The Little Andaman Island was considered as an ideal land to rehabilitate the people as much as possible. A target was fixed in this plan period. Accordingly, a Five Year Action Plan was prepared, under which 163 families in 1974-75, 250 families in 1975-76, 425 in 1976-77, 670 in 1977-78 and 670 in 1978-79 were targeted to be resettled in Little Andaman. The available records reveal that by the year 1974, 466 Bengali families were settled

in four villages, viz. Netaji Nagar, Ramakrishnapur, Rabindra Nagar and Vivekanandapur. Apart from the Bengali settlers, 8 Burmese and 25 Tamil families from Sri Lanka were also settled on the islands. Later, 28 Moplah families were also rehabilitated at Rabindra Nagar.⁴ In the year 1972-73, the process of settling about 300 families of Car Nicobarese in Little Andaman was initiated by Andaman and Nicobar Administration during the stint of the then Chief Commissioner Harmander Singh. The settlement was named in honour of him, that was only a few kilometers away from the Onge *Beyras* (Onge community huts) at South Bay. While formulating the scheme, the Department of Rehabilitation had indicated to the Ministry that it had no objection for earmarking 500 acres of plantation land in Little Andaman for the Car Nicobarese families. With the green signal further preliminary steps were taken. A team of captains from Car Nicobar visited Little Andaman on 28 April, 1972 and the Nicobarese leaders found the land suitable for them. It was decided that the area shown to the Nicobarese representatives may be kept reserved for their settlement and the entire area may be demarcated. The Nicobarese had expressed that they would clear the area by themselves. It was decided that each family would get 5 acres for plantation, 3 acres for fruit plants and 2 acres for paddy cultivation. It was also decided that 300 families would be settled in three years. The decisions were conveyed to Chief Commissioner, who was attending the Central Coordination Meeting at Delhi on 29 April, 1972. In that meeting, the allotment of 10 acres of hilly land to these families was accepted. After a crucial period of review, discussions and correspondence about finding the resources, on 29th March, 1973, after receiving the sanction for de-reservation, 50 Nicobarese families comprising of 150 members were brought to Little Andaman. Two thatched sheds had already been constructed for them. On 28th July, 1973, Chief Commissioner Harmander Singh observed that the Nicobarese had also constructed a guest house in tribal pattern and had cleared about 25 acres of jungle land. When he visited, they were busy in the process of making a racing canoe. They acceded that they would abide by the Government instructions and orders as may be issued to them regarding their territorial limits to which they could go and that they will have to confine themselves to the area allotted to them and should not trespass into the remaining Onge Reserve, not even for contacting Onges or for hunting and they will have to carry out the provisions of the Protection of the Tribal Regulations. They agreed

that they will comply with such order. The proximity of the Onge tribal too came into question, when the Nicobarese demanded additional land and the Chief Commissioner S.M. Krishnatry did not press the Home Ministry as his predecessors had been doing.⁵

Year	Onge
1901	672 est.
1911	631 est.
1921	321 est.
1931	250 est.
1941	-
1951	150
1961	129

Year	Onge
1971	112
1981	97
1991	99
2001	96
2008	88
2011	101
2021	126

The Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) was established in 1976 with appointment of Bakhtawar Singh as the first Executive Secretary. During the same period, it was decided to resettle the Onge of Little Andaman at one place, i.e. Dugong Creek situated at the eastern coast of the island. Under this decision, the Onges of central region, Jackson Creek and other adjacent *Beyras* (community huts) were resettled at one place at Dugong Creek in 1976-77. They were encouraged to live in 26 wooden houses newly built by the administration. On the other end, after few years, the Onges of Southern region were resettled at South Bay in 1980. Here also they were allotted 6 wooden houses of the pattern already introduced at Dugong Creek. These two settlements were provided with coconut plantations for economic gain of the Onges.

Demography

According to Portman (1899), at the time of British occupation in 1858, the native population in the Little Andaman Island was possibly more than 2000⁶, while the census report of 1901 reveals it to be 672 (Male 366, Female 306) only further decreased to 97 in 1981.

During my research for M.Phil degree on the dissertation "*Changes in the subsistence economy among the Onges*" in 1994-95 and during my doctoral research among them in 1995-98, I found the same graph pattern of productivity amongst the Onges as observed since 1981 onwards. During those decades their population was increasing and decreasing at equal rate as a playing device 'see-saw' sadly from year to year. As a

settlement in-charge when I started living in the Onge settlement in 2006 I recorded their population to be 97 only, a repeat of 1981 data. After few months an old man Kogagili died of sickness and the population dwindled down to 96 (Adult 56 and Minor 40 or say Male 52 and Female 44). It was also in my close observation that the see-saw population of the Onge was actually caused by the social behaviour and individual trend of the Onges themselves. The Onge society is traditionally controlled by the senior members especially the senior hunters. These senior members of 60+ often prefer to marry young and minor girls adamantly. For example, old men Tanaguru (70) married with Kapita (23) and nobody dared to object against this. The Onge Chief Tambolai (60) married with Kanchan (19) and Koira (55) married with Mausumi (15). Similarly, the old women of the Onge community have also the same trend to marry young ones; for example – an Onge woman Koilabai (70) married to Kimboi (23) and Botalai (65) selected Chogagae (30) as her husband. Secondly, sometimes a young member marries a small girl of 6-7 years and then both of them with no physical contact stay distantly from each other until the girl attains her first menstruation to be adolescent. Thus, the couple remains silent for about a decade without contributing to the population increase of the Onge society. The third reason behind the small population was observed that the cases of widows and widowers are not seriously and immediately entertained for re-marriage in the Onge society. During my stint in the Onge settlement, as per my prepared official population list of 2006, the Onge widows Sheela, Kwankutai, Meenai and Tonkitai were later joined by Kanchan and Maya after the death of their husbands Tambolai and Kogagili respectively while Belloi and Uglai were listed as widowers. These widows and widowers to mark their status were adorned with the *Tiboichu* (strip made of wild climbers) around their neck, arms and knees. Interestingly, the widows always prefer to stay as a group. They would come to me for ration collection as a specific group at specific time. The 70% of the Onge population I found unproductive for another contributory reason that there were many unproductive families in the settlement. Such families included Ramesh+Nandbichbegi alias Baby and Tai+Kakae later joined by the old aged couples such as Kimboi+Koilabai, Chotaju+Bettibegi, Badaraju+Dankalanka, Bhalla+Mallai and Chogagae+Botalai. Apart from this, the Onge society had a number of unmarried boys with no suitable girl to marry because the suitable girls were already married by the senior members of 60+ age. These inter-woven factors collectively

appeared to be a strong hidden barricade against the 'population growth' of the Onge.

In context of the dwindled population, the situation became more grim and deplorable when unfortunately eight Onges on 8-10 December 2008 died of consumption of a strange liquid later identified as methanol alcohol. After this incident, the number of widows in the Onge settlement increased to be 14. Looking to these 14 widows, 3 widowers, 1 unmarried marriageable girl and 5 unmarried young boys, I decided to arrange for remarriages of the suitable Onges. Keeping in mind that we should not disturb their personal lives and culture, I modified my thinking that when a radical change in every aspect of Onge life in last few decades has already been taken place, then a little encouraging management to grow their population with no centripetal mix of outside culture is no harm to them from any perceptual angle. Small population makes them vulnerable and poses a threat of extinction. Eventually, I decided to go with my decision and made a plan to prepare a list of matched couple for marriages/re-marriages with consent of the parents and other senior tribes. Some widows and widowers had crossed the age of reproduction while some of them were still young. I was alert that the pairs should be matched with minimum age gap. A list of probable pairs drafted but required further negotiation with the senior tribal members to avoid any socio-cultural or sentimental clash. While drafting the new pairs I took utmost care of the fact that the Onges of one *Beyra* region are traditionally brothers and sisters but they can marry a suitable partner of other territory. Eventually, with help of the Onge Chief and other senior Onges, I organised the following six marriages phase-wise on 16th January, 2008 and 14th May, 2009. Thus, through these marriages 12 Onge members got the new wheel of life.

Uglai (Widower) with Tikoigagae (Widow)	16/01/08	Phase I
Santosh (Widower) with Reetai (Widow)	16/01/08	Phase II
Koitangae (Unmarried youth) with Shanti (Widow)	16/01/08	Phase III
Kwakui (Unmarried youth) with Champa (Widow)	16/01/08	Phase IV
Rakabegi (Unmarried youth) with Mary (Unmarried)	14/05/09	Phase V
Tojeie (Unmarried youth) with Uniakiabegi (Unmarried)	14/05/09	Phase VI

On 28-10-2011 two more Onge marriages were organised.

1. Shri Shekhar (unmarried youth) with Mausumi (widow)
2. Shri Sameer (unmarried youth) with Arati (widow).

It is interesting to mention here that in some cases of negotiation with the parents of the brides and grooms, they did not agree initially. They demanded some little things to be provided with them. Few parents were demanding that gift items such as steel trunk and clothes etc. be given to them while Tonkitai, mother of Santosh demanded before the marriage of her son that biscuits and eggs should be added in the feast. Eventually they were made satisfied with these things.

After the above marriages and re-marriages, 26 Onge children have been born in the above mentioned families, contributing to the sudden increase in the Onge population from 88 (2008) to 126 (2021), despite the facts that many new born children and old members had died during this period. Among these old members were Badaraju, Koilabai, Tanaguru, Meenai, Kwankutai, Maya, Malai, Botalai, Satya and Jain, a psychiatric patient. Now (June 2021) the Onge population has 69 male and 57 female = 126. Thus they have been retrieved back with their own ethnic identity and values from the edge of gradual extinction.

Habitat

Traditionally, the Onges would construct two types of hut. They would construct huge bee-hive shaped community hut called *Beyra* or *Beyraley* to accommodate about 35-50 persons at a time. A *Beyra* is sufficiently strong to protect the dwellers from the heavy downpours. Unfortunately, the *Beyra* with the construction of the wooden houses by the administration for the Onges in the process of re-settlement has become invisible. Earlier the Onge habitats within the Little Andaman Island and Rutland Island were classified by respective *Beyra* names. Some *Beyra* names can be found in the old map of the Little Andaman Island. The second type of hut called '*Koraley*' is an individual hut or say family hut. A meagre number of thatched *Koraleys* were seen during my research in 1998 at South Bay. They constructed these *Koraleys* to get rid of the heat and suffocation inside the wooden houses. The South Bay people have been shifted to Dugong Creek after the Tsunami disaster of December 2004. The said two patterns of the Onge hut have become out of vogue in the Onge settlement, a crucial impact of the re-settlement.

During honey season in April-May, the Onges in groups stay for few days in the forest. They construct neither *Beyra* nor *Koraley* but temporary open hut of forest materials. When it is too hot to bear in the settlement, they all for a short period prefer to stay in the forest in temporary huts, but they come back before the chiggers increase in the forest. To protect themselves from the attack of the chiggers they have the remedial practice of giving adequate fire and smoke inside the hut, as explained by Late Tambolai, the then Onge chief (2006).

A *Beyra* is made of straight long canes held together but at certain gaps and bent from top to the earth having a straight thick wooden pole pitched in the center of the hut. These canes are tied with horizontally laid canes' rings from top to bottom making the entire skeleton in shape of a beehive or an umbrella. Inside the hut in addition to the centre pole, few more straight poles are pitched to support the cane grill. Then the skeleton of the roof is covered with mats of woven palm leaves. Inside the *Beyra*, the Onge families sleep on sleeping platforms of various size and design. There is no dispute or skirmish for want of space.

Dance, Adornment and Song

On special occasions, they adorn their body with specific patterns made by red clay; and wear bands of Pandanus leaves called *Torewwey*, designed by red clay (as shown in the picture). The stripes of *Torewwey* are attached round his arms near the shoulder and round his wrists, and others are placed as bands crossing his chest from shoulder to the waist on the opposite side and crossing his abdomen from the iliac crest on the side to the trochanter on the other. Head bands can also be seen on the special occasions, particularly during the group dance.

The Onges perform dance not merely for the purpose of releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself. Dance is a ritual part in their culture. The concept of time and space is there in their dance organization. They avoid individual dance and prefer to perform organized group dance. Dance movements tend to be organized into a spatial or rhythmic pattern, tracing a circle on the ground, following a certain order of steps. The dancers grasp one another by the hands,



wrists, elbows and shoulders and face the centre of the circle. Thematic song is involved in their group dance. Their dance is a cultural part of Tanaguru (ritual of male adolescence), Borengyabey (ritual of female adolescence), birth ritual, marriage ritual and other happy occasions.

The dancers both male and female adorn themselves with traditional palm leaves called *Torewwey*. They wear head band of the same leaf. Sometimes, the *Torewwey* leaves are decorated with red clay '*Towegiru*' which is especially done by the women.

The Onges regard the unpainted body as open to all sorts of dangers and paint new-born babies immediately after birth with red ochre, partly no doubt in mere observance of tradition but also partly as conscious protection against '*Tekwaja*' (mosquitoes) and '*Biji-jimey*' (sand flies).

The songs of the Onge chiefly revolve around canoe construction, successful hunting and honey collection. They don't keep their volume high while singing but I have observed that the present Jarawa members prefer to convey their song as far away as possible.

Life Cycle Rituals

The Onge still perform the following rituals.

- (a) Ge Angachibe or Enangalebey (Marriage)
- (b) Aale Ge Ootoke or Enao-tukebey (Ritual of child birth)
- (c) Gay borata Ge Tama Nua Totoreka (Pig hunting)
- (d) Tanaguru (Ritual of adulthood)
- (e) Narelange Totoreka (Turtle hunting)
- (f) Kekonoea, Totoreka (Crab hunting)
- (g) Bogluba (Fishing)
- (h) Weeya (Clay painting)
- (i) Kayo-uthukey (Naming the child after the birth)
- (j) Boreng-yabey and Enobey-mamegey (Adolescence ritual of a girl)
- (k) Enakwikonebey/Nakoralelebey (Death ritual)
- (l) Enakoche-chenganebey (Crying ritual).

An Onge birth (*Uthukebey*) appears to be a reason for a grand celebration amongst the Onges. There is no thinking difference between a male child and a female child. During the labour pain, mother's stomach is softly pressed with a plant extract (*Tambokaka*), to reduce pain. Right after the infant is born, the umbilical cord (*Ekwaley*) is cut with a sharp

edge of a shell (*Totulye*) or a glass flake. They don't show any hurry in the process. Essentially, the mother is given a little rest before the umbilical cord is cut. The placenta (*Ebagey*) is burnt at a secluded spot. Now the mother will be given everything to eat except the pork. After a few days the mother would be offered to consume wild tuber (*Titonye*).

The childhood ends with the onset of adulthood, usually around 14 years of age for both sexes. A boy has to hunt a pig and other members in the '*Tanagiru*' (adolescence ceremony of an Onge boy) have to hunt at least twenty pigs to celebrate. The another name for *Tanagiru* is *Tamaley*. The female adolescence ritual is called *Borengyabey*. When a girl attains her first menstruation, the *Borangyabey* ritual is performed through which she becomes an adult one (*Yobe-mamey*). She is made to sit in a separate enclosure/corner (*Eto-tavo*). She is offered no food for the time being. On the next day morning she is adorned with strips of palm leaves (*Torewwey*) decorated with red clay mixed with turtle/pig fat, above the waist. After a ritual bath she is given no meat but simple food (now rice) for the next three days. After three days she is again taken to sea for a bath. Now she is allowed to eat pork; but in next few days if pork is not made available to her by the Onge hunters, she enters their houses with an assistant (preferably mother). She pulls down and throws out their vessels and clothes to express her childish-anger and appeal to them to go and hunt a pig for her. Then the hunters go to forest and hunt a pig for her. With the first chew of the pork she becomes a complete adult.

Interestingly in the Onge community, a marriage ritual is very short but the celebration goes long. The Onges are still strong in their community-control over the selection of bride or groom for a marriage. Both the boy and the girl should not belong to one band or say clan as in the case of the Jarawa.

On the nuptial day, at the start of the ritual, the groom sits at the centre of all and then the bride comes there being escorted by a family member and is made to sit on the lap of the groom for a while. This small ritual is followed by the long celebration with group dance (*Tonolallebey*) and songs (*Gigabawey*).

Sometimes bride stays with her own parents after her marriage because of her small age. For instance, Miss Lilly, daughter of Bada Raju was married girl. She was married to Shri Prakash of South Bay. She was not allowed to go and stay with her husband till she possessed adulthood.

Earlier, the Onges would bury the corpse under the bedstead (*Kaamey*) inside the house. Now this practice is obsolete and they bury their dead outside the house but not far away.

After few months of the burial, they decide to perform the death ritual *Enakwikoney*, which is one of their major cultural events. The *Enakwikoney*, undertakes all those deaths, of which the *Enakwikoney* was not hitherto done and has to be done now. On this day, all of them gather at the gravesite. In the beginning of *Enakwikoney*, on the grave they construct a temporary pole mattress, rectangle in shape, as a sitting space with the help of wooden poles (*Anu-aibo* or sometimes called as *Remmey*). On this mattress only 4-5 persons can sit comfortably at a time. The bark threads (*Tiboichu*) showing the status of widow/widower is removed (*Gilebu*) from the neck and knees of the widow (*Kwala*) or widower (*Kwalagey*) of the deceased. The removed *Tiboichu* is buried immediately. After removal of the *Tiboichu*, the widow is made to sit on the *Anu-aibo* and other members apply red clay (*Towegiru*) on her head, and the jaw of her husband (*Enibirangey*) she has to wear around her neck for a while. Relatives of the dead member on the *Anu-aibo* hold each other and silently weep for the moment.

The *Enakwikoney* is performed in broad day light followed by group dance (*Tonolallebey*) and group song (*Gigabawey*) in the night.

The Onges do not have any 'adoption' related ritual, but the practice of adoption in the Onge society is in vogue. Infertility is one of the reasons. The childless Tai and his wife Kakae has adopted Bulambegi's son namely Kishen at his small age. Kishen still displays respect and a filial affection by calling Tai as his father. The orphans are also adopted. The Onges also have a temporary form of adoption when children are kept for some years by an adopting couple before they return to their biological parents. The adoptive parents happily, declare the adopted child to be their own.

Cloth

"The Onge have no proper concept of dress to cover the body in shame" – such comment was made by some scholars and authors in 1940-70s. In fact, to cover the genital, male members used genital guard called '*Mareqwagey*' while the females used '*Nakunyagey*'. Sometimes, under the outside influence, instead of '*Mareqwagey*', strips of loin or cotton clothes were used by the male members called as '*Eitete-kuti*' ('*Langoti*' in local Hindi), but this type of clothing has become obsolete at present.

Now the things have perceptibly been changed. The Onges now don't go nude or semi-nude. During the period I was posted in the Onge settlement, I observed that staffs of various departments posted there and other people on opportunities would donate their used clothes to the Onges. Those gifted clothes were mostly shabby and unfitting to the innocent natives. This practice was stopped generating awareness amongst them, since the administrative policy has been to make them self-dependant having the sense of self-respect. The Onges have no traditional or ethnic dress pattern as in case of the other tribes of the mainland India.

After they came in contact with the outsiders, they gradually adopted the habit of wearing modern clothes while '*Nakunyagey*' is still in use by the old women under their modern clothes.

Food

The Onges are very fond of turtle, turtle egg, fish, crab and Dugong. Honey is another major forest-based food of the Onges. They climb trees to cut down honey-combs or to dig them out of cavities and store them in their traditional wooden bucket called *Ukoo*. There is a strong indigenous myth about honey in the context of Birth. A spirit called '*Onkobowkwe*' sends souls of unborn babies to the wombs of Onge woman through a certain way. As per Onge belief, *Onkobowkwe* lives in Honeycomb and when an Onge woman takes the honey in her diet, soul sent by the spirit enters into her womb which causes her pregnancy. Despite their knowledge of conception through sexual intercourse they believe that a woman cannot conceive unless *Onkobowkwe* desires it. On the other hand, a childless woman is believed to be the victim of the curse of *Onkobowkwe*. This makes the honey most important diet item among the Onge. Interestingly when a matured beehive is seen they climb up the trees without providing any protection to their bare bodies and here the nature has come to their rescue. There grow bushes of a plant called '*tonjoghe*' (another name—*Beengey*) in the forests. All they have to do is to chew some of the leaves of *tonjoghe* and smear the pulp all over their bodies even in their hair. Some they spit at the bees. This provides to them complete protection from bee attack.

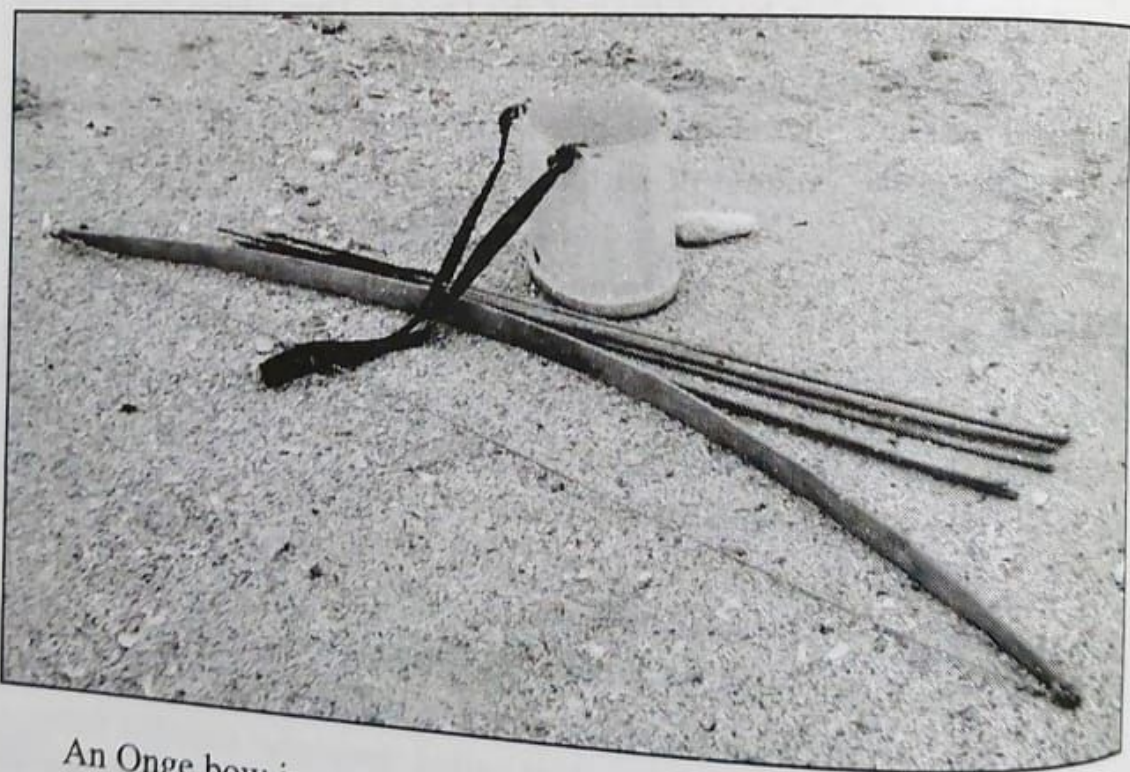
The agriculture is an introduced practice to the hunter-gatherers. These days in their settlement, they grow varieties of vegetable. The

Banana, Mango, Jackfruit and Papaya are abundantly grown in the Onge settlement. Their spiritual belief does not allow them to consume bird, crocodile, bat, rat and snakes, etc.

In addition to the monthly free ration items such as rice, wheat flour, sugar, pulse, tea leaves, onion, milk powder etc. on a prescribed scale being supplied by the Andaman Adim Janajati Vikas Samiti, Port Blair, the Onges still go to hunt wild pig, fish and collect the forest and sea produces. In the forest, they collect wild jackfruit, wild cashew, wild mango, various edible fruits, roots and tubers. The Onge have well learnt the method of preparing food from the non-Onge communities.

Tools, Techniques and Material Changes in Onge Lifestyle

An Onge bow has notches at both ends for the bow-string with the ends identical so that the bows did not have identifiable up or down sides. It is traditionally smaller than that of the Andamanese.



An Onge bow in cross-section is somewhat convex inside, towards the marksman, and much more convex away from him with both ends ending in a notch on which the bow-string could be fastened. There is no change in the art as I observed in the recent decades. Similarly, there is no change in making of a canoe (*Dangey*). Canoe is made of hollowed-out trunk of *Kwalulu* tree but fire does not seem to have been used in the laborious hollowing-out process. Cutting down a large tree and then hollowing it out is done with adze called *Tonyaway* by the Onges.

Selecting and cutting down a tree for a canoe required an experienced eye. Many types of softwood trees are available but the *Kwalulu* tree is especially selected for a canoe construction. During the month of August, 2021, the Onge members Uglai, Mohanlall and Onorey alias Ramesh had constructed three big canoes. Uglai has gifted his canoe to Totoko, his son-in-law.

At present, the Onge have started using different types of steel and aluminium utensils and vessels to prepare their foods. The outer civilization has left a great impact on the Onge material culture. The Onge have begun to use all sorts of tool, implement, container and other domestic items that are available in the local market of outer civilization. They often use fishing line and hook to catch fishes. One day I requested them to show me their skill of fishing with bow and arrow. In a fine weather, I accompanied them in shallow water and was delighted to see that their skill of fishing with bow and arrow is still intact and impressive.

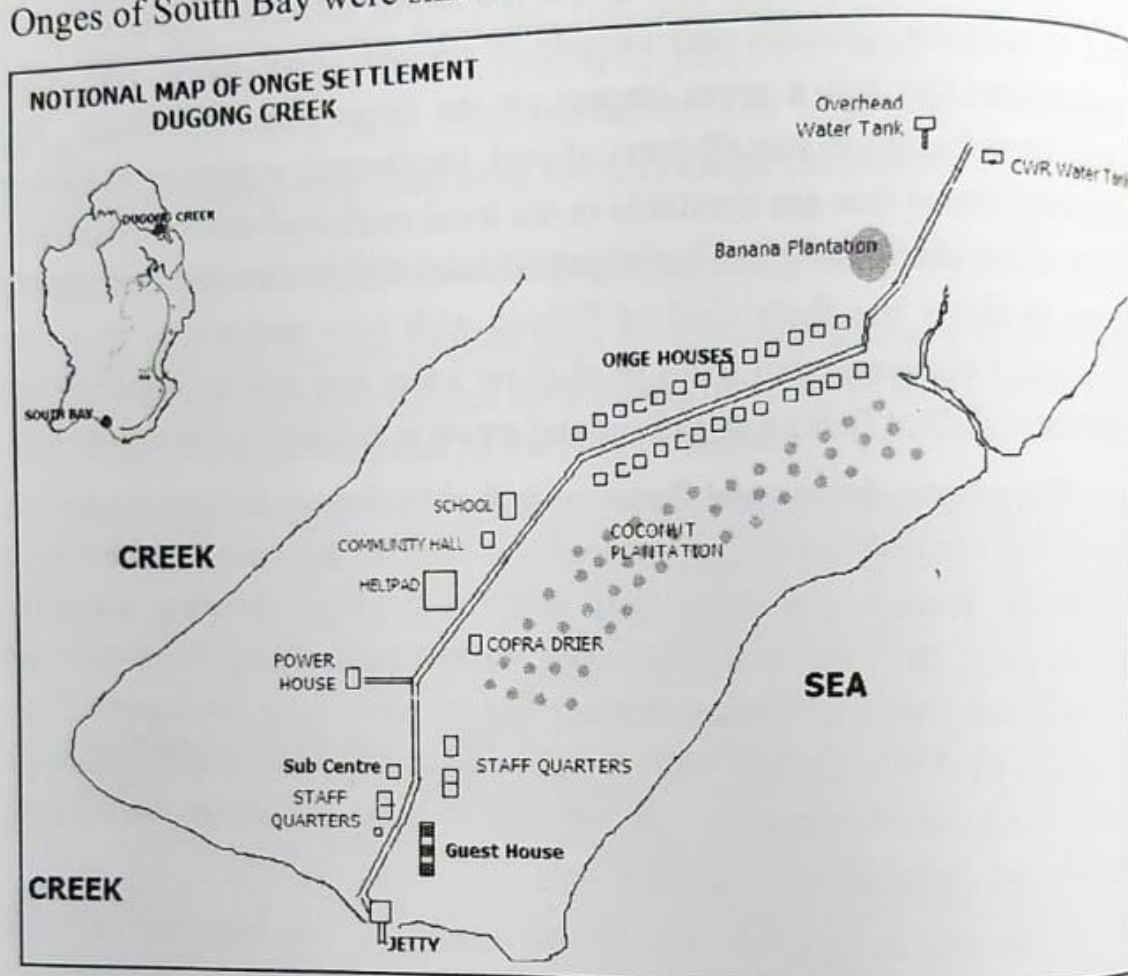
The plastic drums and flotsams drifted by the sea current are picked up by the Onge from the sea-shores and used as vessels and other using materials. Earlier the Onge used nautilus shell for drinking water. In recent past, the Onges would make earthen pots. The pottery was not an original Onge invention but appears to have been introduced from outside. In 2007, myself with the help of an old Onge man Totanagae excavated dateable pieces of earthen pots at an old camp site namely *Tambebui Beyra* near Dugong Creek.

After the British advent, the dog reached Little Andaman in 1887 and the Onge widely adopted this animal by 1920s.

Administrative Initiatives

After its formation on 25th March, 1976, Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) is working with the main objectives, i.e. to prevent extinction of the tribes, protect them, promote the socio-economic development of the tribes, solve the tribal problems and to develop the socio-economic environment essential to the survival and growth of the tribes. The Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) is a society registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 and it came into existence remarkably during 1976. The AAJVS works under the aegis of the Andaman & Nicobar Administration.

The Onge were resettled at two places viz. Dugong Creek and South Bay in Little Andaman Island in 1976-77 and around 1980 respectively. After the establishment of Dugong Creek settlement, the Onge of Jackson Creek were rehabilitated at Dugong Creek. There were 26 and 6 wooden houses constructed for the Onge of Dugong Creek and South Bay respectively. After the Tsunami disaster of December 2004, the Onges of South Bay were shifted to Dugong Creek.



A 24 KW Diesel Generator set has been established at Dugong Creek in 1979 which has been enhanced to 62.5 KVA now. A solar Power plant was established at Dugong Creek for the Onge on 23rd January, 1993. Streetlights were provided to the settlements with approach footpath.

A primary school was functioning since 1978, which was upgraded to Middle School during my stint as the settlement in-charge in 2011. On 18-11-2011, I took with me some Onge students to Hut Bay to witness the Science Exhibition held in Govt. Model Senior Secondary School. This was the first time in the history of Onge Education. In the next year (2012), the Onge boys who accompanied me in previous visit to Hut Bay took part with their own artefacts in the Science and Art Exhibition held in the Govt. Model Senior Secondary School. This time or say for the first

time, there was a special stall under the banner of Middle School, Dugong Creek with display of Onge model canoe, model hut, basket and misc. items made and displayed by the Onge boys namely Sameer, Kishen, Prashant, Dilip, Ujala and Kanchan. The stall with amazing display became a super hit show in the entire exhibition and won first prize. Subsequently, the Onge boys took part in the inter-school exhibition same year and won the first prize, awarded by the then Lt. Governor, Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

At present, a Health & Wellness Centre has been established with appointment of medical staffs. A Police Radio station is also functioning to strengthen the communication system. Drinking water is being supplied to the Onge houses.

On experimental basis a piggery unit was established in 1983, but it was observed that the Onges do not like to domesticate pig.

During 1980s, few Onge members Ramu (Marine Department), Prakash (Police), Intogagae (Police), Totanangae (Health), were in the Government service. Later, many youths have also joined the government sectors. At present, the Onge government servants are Rajkumar and Suresh (Electricity), Totoko alias Vicky (Water Supply section of Public Work Department), Rakesh and Sameer (Education Department) and Oroti (Health).

An Anganwadi is functioning for welfare of the Onges. Two tribal women namely Sheela and Kakae are appointed as Worker and Helper respectively.

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